

New Jersey Self-Help Group Clearinghouse

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TRANSITIONING FROM A PROFESSIONALLY-RUN TO A MEMBER-RUN SELF-HELP GROUP

There are many reasons why groups change from professionally-run support groups to member-run self-help groups. Sometimes funding for the program is eliminated, the facilitator is reassigned or leaves the agency, or perhaps the group was originally designed to be a short-term group only. Sometimes the need for this changeover emerges from the group itself. Whatever the cause, change is difficult for everyone involved, and letting go can be as difficult for the professional as it is for the group members.

Whether the group must come to an end and the facilitator is encouraging the group to continue as a member-run group, or the group itself has decided to continue on their own, there are several things that can be done to make the transition smoother and more apt to be successful.

Before Transitioning

It's crucial for you, as the facilitator, to be as honest as you can about your thoughts and feelings during this process. The more you and the group prepared for the changeover, the better.

1. If your group is planned as a short-term group (meeting only for a specific number of times), at the very first meeting explain to the group that the continuation of the group as a member-run group will be their decision if they are willing to assume and share responsibilities.
2. Consider why this transition is important to you. If you must terminate the group, remember that transitioning the group will continue the life that you gave it initially.
3. Is this transition important to the group? How does the group feel about becoming member-run? Has the desire for change come from the group itself or is it an idea being forced upon the members? The more accepting the members are of the idea, the better the chance for success.
4. Understand the difference in dynamics between professionally-run versus self-help groups, and the importance of "group ownership."
5. Consider what role, if any, you might consider having with the group in the future.
6. Identify and encourage potential core group members.

Transitioning is a process that takes time, work and patience. It is also an opportunity for everyone to prepare themselves for the eventual changes ahead. Your goals during this process should be to educate the group on the benefits of member-run self-help groups, help familiarize them with the tools that they will need to run the group, foster independence, and build their self-esteem through encouragement and positive reinforcement, all while gradually phasing out your involvement. Remember, it is more effective to encourage transition through your personal behavior than through your words.

1. As soon as possible, let the members know that the group can eventually be member-run. Discuss with them their concerns about "going it alone" and find out what they feel they will need to run the group on their own. Let the group know that they will not be replicating your work—they will be developing their own type of group.
2. Educate group members about the benefits of self-help mutual support. Consider locating existing self-help groups as positive role models and encourage group representatives to visit them.
3. Seek out and distribute self-help group guides.

4. Let the group know that they have could consider the option of joining a national organization that has similar goals.
5. Help members identify a “transitioning team” or a “core group” of members who would be willing to assume the responsibilities of the group.
6. Identify all of the tasks/roles that you are currently doing and recruit group members to volunteer for these tasks. During each meeting, pass on the responsibility for at least one additional task, gradually phasing out your involvement. Allow sufficient time for the membership to become comfortable with assuming the various roles and responsibilities. Have members double up or rotate the group leadership role so that all members develop facilitation skills. Encourage the membership to feel responsible for the group’s success and continuance. By the time you leave, you should be responsible for very little.
7. Offer support and training to the core group of potential leaders as needed. Stress shared leadership from the start--one person cannot do it alone.
8. Share specific information about the group with the members. Make a group notebook that includes pertinent information on running the group (information sheets, contact people, referral lists, member phone numbers, etc.) and make it available at meetings so everyone can look at it.
9. If your group does not have any ground rules, help the group develop them. If you do have rules, revisit them to see if they need to be modified.

10. Encourage members by reinforcing successful skills that members display either inside or outside the group. Remind your group that support and encouragement is everyone's job during transition and that cooperation is essential. Emphasize that, unlike your facilitation, there should be no one person in charge-- all group members share the responsibilities.
11. Renegotiate your role with the group. Let them know if you will be available as a consultant, or able to answer their questions by phone. Also educate them about what other professionals can do for them as well.
12. As your last day approaches, remind the group that you will be leaving. Emphasize the many positive aspects of transition. For example, it will be an excellent opportunity to equalize power in the group, share skills and build group and individual self-esteem.
13. Allow for closure. Focus on the growth that the members have experienced during your time together, and the positive aspects of group membership. This might be a good time for the group to pick a new name for their new member-run group.
14. Although you have been letting go, sharing tasks and beginning to say good-bye already, this needs to be done in a formal way. Possibly use separation exercises to help you and the members focus on personal feelings and fears. As a final gift to the group, you might go around to each group member and say to each person by name, what you will miss about them, or what you have learned from them. Finally, there may be ritual such as a hug, song, food or whatever is comfortable for the group. This helps to complete closure and good-byes. It gives the group a chance to do something non-verbally.

After the Transition

1. Accept that the group will be different after you leave. This is not a rejection of your style or contribution. It is indicative of empowerment.
2. If possible, be available to assist the group with problems or questions they may have.
3. Be alert to information, and to other professionals and services that may be helpful to the group in the future.
4. Remember and accept that not all members will continue with the new group. If possible, refer these people to other needed services.

SEPARATION EXERCISES

Group Discussion About Separation and Loss

The group might think about a few of these questions and write down their feelings. Afterwards, they can share either with the group or with a partner.

1. How has the group changed and grown?
 - What do you remember about the group when it first started?
 - What do you remember about yourself when you first came to the group?
 - What has changed in the group, in you and for other members?

2. “When the facilitator leaves, I’m afraid that.....”
 - On a sheet of paper write “When (facilitator’s name) leaves, I’m afraid....” Ask the group to write as many short responses as they can. Possible responses might be:
 - I’ll quit
 - The group will fold
 - I’ll have to lead
 - I won’t get to lead the group
 - The group will turn social
 - No one will take charge
 - Ask the group to share some of their fears. As a group, look for the grain of truth in the fears. Choose the four most common fears and explore what the group can do to keep these fears from coming true.

3. Think about how you left your own parents as a teenager or young adult.
 - Why and under what circumstances did you leave?
 - How did you feel about leaving?

4. Think about sending a child to school for the first day (or leaving child in daycare)
 - What happened or what do you think might happen?
 - Are these feelings similar from your reaction to the facilitator leaving?
 - How does your confidence level affect your letting go?

Article adopted from “Passing the Mantle: Resources on Transitioning from Professional to Group Leadership” produced by Ontario Self-Help Network, a program of the Self-Help Resource Center, Toronto, Canada.